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# THE HAUNTED MIND OF SHIRLEY JACKSON

*A new biography explores one of the twentieth century's most tortured writers.*

**By Zoë Heller**

October 10, 2016

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Here's how not to be taken seriously as a woman writer: Use demons and ghosts and other gothic paraphernalia in your fiction. Describe yourself publicly as "a practicing amateur witch" and boast about the hexes you have placed on prominent publishers. Contribute comic essays to women's magazines about your hectic life as a housewife and mother.

A new biography argues that Jackson's books should be seen as proto-feminist. Illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source: Frances Benjamin Johnston / Library of Congress (House)

Shirley Jackson did all of these things, and, during her lifetime, was largely dismissed as a talented purveyor of high-toned horror stories—"Virginia Werewoolf," as one critic put it. For most of the fifty-one years since her death, that reputation has stuck. Today, "The Lottery," her story of ritual human sacrifice in a New England village (first published in this magazine, in 1948), has become a staple of eighth-grade reading lists, and her novel "The Haunting of Hill House" (1959) is often mentioned as one of the best ghost stories of all time. But most of her substantial body of work—including her masterpiece, the beautifully weird novel "We Have Always Lived in the Castle" (1962)—is not widely read. In recent years, there have been signs of renewed interest in Jackson's work. Various writers, including Neil Gaiman, Jonathan Lethem, and A. M. Homes, have praised her idiosyncratic talent, and new editions of her work have appeared. But these attempts to reclaim Jackson have had a mixed response. In 2010, when the Library of America published an edition of Jackson's selected works, edited by Joyce Carol Oates, a critic at *Newsweek* protested that it was an exercise in barrel-scraping: "Shirley Jackson? A writer mostly famous for one short story, 'The Lottery.' Is LOA about to jump the shark?"

In a new, meticulously researched biography, "A Rather Haunted Life," Ruth Franklin sets out to rescue Jackson from the sexists and the genre snobs who have consigned her to a dungeon of kooky, spooky middlebrow-ness. Franklin's aim is to establish Jackson as both a major figure in the American Gothic tradition and a significant, proto-feminist chronicler of mid-twentieth-century women's lives. In contrast to Jackson's first biographer, Judy Oppenheimer, whose 1988 book, "Private Demons," somewhat played up Jackson's alleged occult powers, Franklin argues that Jackson's sorceress persona was mostly shtick: a fun way to tease interviewers and to sell books. Jackson was interested in witchcraft, she writes, less as a "practical method for influencing the world" than as "a way of embracing and channeling female power at a time when women in America often had little control over their lives." Similarly, Jackson used supernatural elements in her work not to deliver cheap thrills but, in the manner of Poe or James, "to plumb the depths of the human condition," or, more particularly, to explore the "psychic damage to which women are especially prone."

Jackson was born in San Francisco in 1916 and brought up, with a younger brother, in one of the city's affluent suburbs. Her parents were conservative country-club people, who regarded their high-strung child with some perplexity. Jackson identified herself early on as an outsider and as a writer. "When i first used to write stories and hide them away in my desk," she later wrote in an unpublished essay, "i used to think that no one had ever been so lonely as i was and i used to write about people all alone. . . . i thought i was insane and i would write about how the only sane people are the ones who are condemned as mad and how the whole world is cruel and foolish and afraid of people who are different."

The chief representative of the cruel and foolish world during Jackson's childhood was her mother, Geraldine, an elegant, rather vapid woman, who was disappointed by her daughter and who made it clear that she would have preferred a prettier, more pliable one. She told Jackson that she was the product of a failed abortion and harangued her constantly about her bad hair, her weight, and her "willful" refusal to cultivate feminine charm. Long after Jackson had grown up and moved away, Geraldine continued to send letters criticizing her "helter skelter way of living," her "repetitious" fiction, and her appearance: "I have been so sad all morning about what you have allowed yourself to look like." Quotations from the correspondence of the awful Geraldine are a source of guilty entertainment throughout Franklin's biography.

Jackson's adult life was ostensibly a rebellion against her mother and her mother's values. She became a writer; she grew fat; she married a Jewish intellectual, Stanley Edgar Hyman, and ran a bohemian household in which she dyed the mashed potatoes green when she felt like it. But she never quite shook Geraldine's tentacular grip, or ceased to be tormented by her disapproval. And in her marriage to Hyman she found a person with whom to replicate the abusive relationship.

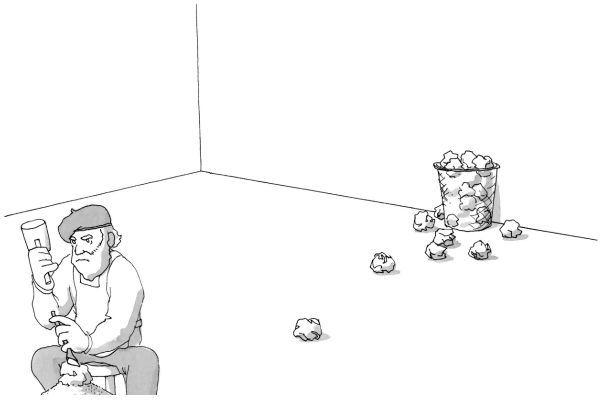
Jackson and Hyman met at Syracuse University; he sought her out after reading her first published story, "Janice," in a college magazine and deciding that she was the girl he was going to marry. To Jackson, who had already begun to experience the anxiety, depression, and "fears of people" that plagued her throughout her life, Hyman seemed a savior: a brilliant man who didn't think she was ugly, who understood her and loved her, who believed in her promise as a writer. His main drawback was his principled insistence on sleeping with other women. He also expected Jackson to listen good-naturedly to accounts of his sexual adventures. On a few occasions during the early stages of their relationship, Hyman's behavior drove Jackson into such paroxysms of anguish that he worried she might be mentally ill. But he refused to compromise his integrity on the issue. "If it turns you queasy, you are a fool," he told her. Jackson, whom Franklin describes as having been primed by her mother's criticisms "to accept a relationship with a man who treated her disrespectfully and shamed her for legitimate and rational desires," reluctantly went along with his terms.

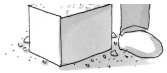
They married—in the face of determined opposition from both sets of parents—shortly after graduating, and moved to New York. During the next couple of years, both of them began contributing to *The New Yorker*, she as a fiction writer and he as a contributor to The Talk of the Town and, later, as a staff writer. In 1945, after their first child was born, they settled in Vermont, where Hyman had been offered a post on the literature faculty at Bennington College. Here, in a

rambling, crooked house in North Bennington, they raised four children and became the center of a social set that included Howard Nemerov, Ralph Ellison, Bernard Malamud, and Walter Bernstein. Their domestic life, as described in the comic dispatches that Jackson wrote for *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman's Home Companion*, was raucous and warm. But Jackson was miserable a good deal of the time, as indicated by her increasing reliance on alcohol, tranquillizers, and amphetamines. She felt patronized in her role as a faculty wife and frozen out by the townspeople of North Bennington. (She took her revenge by using them as the model for the barbaric villagers in "The Lottery.") Most of all, she felt oppressed by her husband.

Hyman's lordly expectations of what he was due as the family patriarch were retrograde, even by the standards of the time. Jackson did the cooking, the cleaning, the grocery shopping, and the child-rearing; he sat at his desk, pondering the state of American letters and occasionally yelling at his wife to come and refill the ink in his pen. (His brother Arthur once commented that Hyman's views on the domestic division of labor were the only aspects of his traditional Jewish upbringing that he had retained.) Long after Jackson became the chief breadwinner in the marriage, Hyman continued to control the family's finances, meting out portions of Jackson's earnings to her as he saw fit. Although he always encouraged Jackson's writing, in part because it was her writing that kept the family afloat, he came to resent how completely her career had eclipsed his. His major published works—"The Armed Vision" (1948), a comparative study of modern methods of literary criticism, and "The Tangled Bank" (1962), on the literary strategies of Marx, Freud, Darwin, and Sir James Frazer—were grand projects of intellectual synthesis, and both had taken on a dusty, doomed, Casaubonish quality by the time he completed them. He took solace in characterizing Jackson to their friends as a sort of gifted idiot, who composed her fiction in a trance state of automatic writing and had to take it to him to have it explained. He also continued to be chronically, blithely unfaithful, mostly with former students.

The motif of a lonely woman setting out to escape a miserable family or a grimly claustrophobic community and ending up "lost" recurs throughout Jackson's stories. Sometimes a woman comes to a place of apparent refuge—a house that seems to offer security and love—only to discover, once she is there, creeping menace or hidden evil. Sometimes, as in several of the stories included in Jackson's first published collection, "The Lottery; or, The Adventures of James Harris" (1949), a woman encounters a romantic, chimerical figure, a "daemon lover," who promises to rescue her and then vanishes, leaving her alone and on the brink of madness, in a frightening, alien landscape. Always, the hope of an alternative, happier life proves illusory.





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If these stories allude to the disappointment of Jackson's marriage—the escape from her mother's house which proved to be no escape at all—they also suggest the nature of the anxieties that prevented her from ever leaving Hyman. She was full of rage toward him, and she expressed this not only in the portraits of insufferably pompous men that she smuggled into her fiction but also in strange revenge-fantasy cartoons that showed her serving Hyman entrails for dinner, or creeping up behind him with a hatchet. She once wrote Hyman a six-page letter explaining why she would eventually divorce him: "I used to think . . . with considerable bitter amusement about the elaborate painstaking buildup you would have to endure before getting [one] of your new york dates into bed . . . they had been sought out, even telephoned, spoken to and listened to, treated as real people, and they had the unutterable blessing of being able to go home afterward. . . . i would have changed place with any of them." Yet fear always inhibited her ability to act on her anger. However intense the miseries of life inside her house, they were, in the end, less vivid to her than the imagined horrors lurking outside it.

Jackson's fiction is a sort of serial investigation of the malevolent, imprisoning power of her own fears. Her mother, in a letter, once reproached her for the excess of "demented girls" in her stories —which was both an excellent Geraldinism and a not entirely unjustified complaint. Eventually, Jackson herself came to lament the narrowness of her thematic range: "I wrote of neuroses and fear and I think all my books laid end to end would be one long documentation of anxiety."

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While her early stories are often about people being oppressed and persecuted by closed-minded communities, in her later work she focussed increasingly on the "demon of the mind"—the evil that afflicts its victims from within. In "The Lottery," a woman is stoned to death by her neighbors and family; in "The Haunting of Hill House," written eleven years later, the stones that rain down on the childhood home of the protagonist, Eleanor, have a more ambiguous source. Eleanor's mother thinks vicious neighbors are responsible; Eleanor and her sister blame each other; but the

mother thinks vicious neighbors are responsible, Eleanor and her sister blame each other, but the strongest suggestion is that the stones are the work of Eleanor's poltergeist, a paranormal manifestation of her rage and unhappiness. At Hill House, where the adult Eleanor has been invited to assist in an investigation of psychic phenomena, she imagines that she is being ganged up on by the other people at the house and that its spirits have singled her out as their target. But what tortures her and ultimately drives her to insanity is her own complex of childhood fear and guilt. The leader of the paranormal investigation assures his assistants that if they ever become too scared they can always run away from the house: "It can't follow us, can it?" But the horror for Eleanor is that she can't run away from what haunts her.

The persona that Jackson presented to the world was powerful, witty, even imposing. She could be sharp and aggressive with fey Bennington girls and salesclerks and people who interrupted her writing. Her letters are filled with tartly funny observations. Describing the bewildered response of *New Yorker* readers to "The Lottery," she notes, "The number of people who expected Mrs. Hutchinson to win a Bendix washing machine at the end would amaze you." Of Katinka De Vries, the wife of the novelist Peter De Vries, she writes that she found it difficult "to spend the day with someone named Katinka, even though she is very nice."

Some of the women in her novels speak with this sort of confident humor. They often function as the alter egos of her fragile, insecure protagonists, representing the boldness and the freedom that they can never achieve. In "The Haunting of Hill House," one of Eleanor's fellow-assistants is the self-assured, ironic Theodora. In "Hangsaman" (1951), Natalie, a lonely college freshman, has a daring imaginary friend named Tony. In "The Bird's Nest" (1954), Elizabeth, a shy clerical worker, develops three other personalities: the charming Beth; the vain, frivolous Bess; and the monstrous Betsy, who promises, "Someday I am going to get my eyes open all the time and then I will eat you and Lizzie both." In "We Have Always Lived in the Castle," it is the protagonist, Merricat, who is the courageous, adventurous figure and her sister, Constance, who is the domestic, gentle partner.

Jackson described Merricat and Constance as "two halves of the same person," and it's possible to see all of her female couples as depictions of the two contradictory halves of her own personality: the potent, angry woman, whom she characterized in her letters as Snarly Shirley, or Sharly, and the cowed woman who felt trapped inside her house. Franklin argues that Jackson's portraits of "split" women anticipate Betty Friedan's description of the nineteen-fifties housewife as a "virtual schizophrenic"—a woman, as Franklin puts it, "pressured by the media and the commercial culture to deny her personal and intellectual interests and subsume her identity into her husband's." All of Jackson's work, Franklin writes, is animated by the tension she felt between her socially sanctioned role as a happy homemaker and her vocation as a writer. As such, it "constitutes nothing less than the secret history of American women of her era."

The tension between socially acceptable housewifery and creative ambition is certainly easy to find in Jackson's life, but it's rather harder to locate in her fiction. There's no question that, in her books, the house is a deeply ambiguous symbol—a place of warmth and security and also one of imprisonment and catastrophe. But the evil that lurks in Jackson's fair-seeming homes is not housework; it's *other people*—husbands, neighbors, mothers, hellbent on squashing and consuming those they profess to care for. And what keeps women inside these ghastly places is not societal pressure, or a patriarchal jailer, but the demon in their own minds. In this sense, Jackson's work is less an anticipation of second-wave feminism than a conversation with her female forebears in the gothic tradition. Her stories take the figure of the imprisoned "madwoman," as found in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" or Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre," and make her the warder of her own jail.

If there is an animating tension in Jackson's fiction, it is surely the tension between wanting to get out and being too frightened to go, or between longing for a home and knowing that in all homes one person inevitably ends up swallowing the other. (As Elizabeth's psychiatrist in "The

Bird's Nest" observes, "Each life, I think . . . asks the devouring of other lives for its continuance.") The problem with hunting for signs of nascent feminist sentiment in Jackson's stories is that doing so tends to shut down, rather than open up, what is most interesting in them. It empties the haunted air and installs a simmering housewife to fill the vacuum. You *can*, I suppose, seize on the fact that the villager who is stoned to death in "The Lottery" is a woman, and read the story, as Franklin does, as "a parable for the ways in which women are forced to sacrifice themselves: if not their lives, then their energies and ambitions." But only if you ignore the fact that the lottery is an equal-opportunity selection process—as likely to pick a man as a woman—and therefore a rather weak metaphor for patriarchal oppression.

In making the case for Jackson as a herald of Friedan and others, Franklin doesn't say much about Jackson's humor—which is a pity, because one of her most distinctive and appealing characteristics is a tendency to interleave *unheimlich* atmospheres and dark portraits of psychological breakdown with bursts of spry drawing-room comedy, droll Mitfordian dialogue, and the odd joke about eating children. (Jackson is sometimes compared to Muriel Spark or to Flannery O'Connor, but the writer with whom she has more in common—and whose influence she worried lay too heavily on her work—is Ivy Compton Burnett.) "We Have Always Lived in the Castle" perfectly demonstrates her talent for mixing creepiness with wit. The sisters Merricat and Constance finally achieve a fairy-tale ending, by killing off the other members of their family and barricading their house against all intruders. They retreat into a cheerfully mad, private world, not unlike the one created by Big Edie and Little Edie in the Maysles brothers' documentary "Grey Gardens."

Shortly after the publication of "We Have Always Lived in the Castle," in September, 1962, Jackson suffered a nervous breakdown and a prolonged bout of acute agoraphobia that prevented her going outside for half a year. "I have written myself into the house," she said. It took her two years to recover completely, during which time she was unable to write. Toward the end of this period, when she was beginning to recover, she tried to coax herself back into producing fiction by starting a journal. In it, she looked forward to a future in which she would be free from fear, and able, finally, to leave her husband—"to be separate, to be alone, to *stand* and *walk* alone, not to be different and weak and helpless and degraded." This new, liberated person, she speculated, would have to find a new subject, a new style, for her writing:

> if i am cured and well and oh glorious alive then my books should be different. who wants to write about anxiety from a place of safety? although i suppose i would never be entirely safe since i cannot completely reconstruct my mind. but what conflict is there to write about then? i keep thinking vaguely about husbands and wives, perhaps in suburbia, but i do not really think this is my kind of thing. perhaps a funny book. a happy book. . . . plots will come flooding when i get the rubbish cleared away from my mind.

Jackson did eventually begin a new novel—a funny, happy novel, in which a recently widowed woman abandons her old name, calling herself Angela Motorman, and embarks on a new life in a boarding house, unencumbered by pets, address books, souvenirs, or even friends. She is alone but confident that she can provide her own "fine high gleefulness." Jackson was seventy-five pages into this novel when she died in her sleep, of heart failure, at the age of forty-eight.

She never found out whether this style was going to work, or whether she would ever really be capable of living alone. But the last words in her journal, written six months before she died, suggest a woman heroically trying to persuade herself into optimism: "I am the captain of my fate. Laughter is possible laughter is possible laughter is possible." ♦

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